NO GREATER LOVE

May 12, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
1 John 4:13-21
John 15:9-17

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."
-John 15:13 (NRSV)

In a recent edition of Context, Martin Marty excerpts a new book by Ursula LeGuin in which she poses the old question: a spaceship lands, the captain wants one human being to talk to, to learn the nature of the human race. Who shall we send? A fine, bright, brave young man, highly educated, at his physical peak, a young woman? LeGuin suggested a wonderful alternative.

> "I would... go down to the local Woolworth's, or the local village marketplace, and pick an old woman, over sixty, from behind the costume jewelry counter or betel nut booth. She has worked hard at small, unimportant jobs all her life - jobs like cooking, cleaning, bringing up kids, selling little objects of adornment or pleasure to people. She was a virgin once, a long time ago, and then a sexually potent fertile female, and then went through menopause. She has given birth several times and faced death several times - the same times. She is facing the final birth/death a little more nearly and clearly every day now. Sometimes her feet hurt something terrible. She never was educated to anything like her capacity, and that is a shameful waste and a crime against humanity, but... she has a stock of sense, wit, patience and experiential shrewdness.
>
> "It will be hard to explain to her why she should be the one. 'Me,' she'll say, just a trifle slyly, 'But I never did anything.' We know better. She knows, though she won't admit it, that Dr. Kissinger has not gone and will never go where she has gone, that the scientists and shamans have not done what she has done." [Context: Martin E. Marty, 2/15/91]

And so, Mother's Day. There are only two holidays, Christmas and Easter, which stimulate Americans to spend more money than Mother's Day.

Greeting cards, gifts, flowers, only at Christmas do we use the telephone more.

Robert Fulghum observes that "around the second Sunday in May are focused powerful forces - concentrated in memory and forever stored in hearts and minds and psyches. Serious stuff, too. Mother's Day is not noted for comedy."

Fulghum, the former clergyman who has written two delightful best selling books of essays, writes - in the second one - about the problems ministers, particularly men, have with Mother's Day.

"Year after year I tried to get it right," he says. "Somehow having had a mother and having known quite a few firsthand didn't seem to count for much. I had never been a mother, so what did I know? I did give it my best, I swear. Tried to deliver on-the-one-hand-and-then-on-the-other-hand sorts of balanced, evasive sermons. Quoted a lot of big name authorities, read sensitive poetry, avoided chancy jokes and gratuitous advice." But it never quite came off.

One memorable Mother's Day, Fulghum decided to raise serious issues. He acknowledged that many, if not most people, have blessed memories of their mothers. But then he gave a "moot quiz" and asked a series of questions.

> "How many are involved in hypocrisy of the most uncomfortable kind on Mother's Day?
>
> How many really don't like your mother - or hate the mother you are?
>
> How many don't like your own children?
>
> How many do not know your own mother?
>
> How many find Mother's Day painful?
>
> "It was not a good idea - the congregation became very quiet, pensive, morose.
>
> "A 'sainted mother' in the congregation accosted him, 'Young man, better men than you have gone straight to hell for suggesting what you said this morning. Shame - shame - shame - for spoiling this day...'" [<u>It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It</u>, p. 99-104]

You could ignore it, I suppose. Mother's Day, after all, is not a religious holiday per se. It does not appear in the Christian year as a festival. But my sense is that most of us will do more celebrating of Mother's Day than we will about Pentecost or All Saints which are Christian festival occasions. Ignore it, we should not, I conclude, precisely because the issues which cluster around issues of children, birth, families, parenting and, in particular, the role of women who often become

mothers, in the workplace, and the society at large, are as important and potentially difficult and painful as any issue before us.

There was an article about Mother's Day in The Christian Century this week. That would not have happened in the recent past, or if it did, the Century would be inclined to conclude that Mother's Day is an exercise in sentimentality and nostalgia, the creation of commercial interests which know a good thing when they see it. This article was different. I learned things I didn't know. For instance, Mother's Day was the invention of Anna Jarvis, an earnest, hardworking Methodist who was not a mother herself but wanted to do something nice to honor her own mother's memory. Around the turn of the century the Sunday School movement was very big, and she convinced Methodist Sunday School officials to observe Mother's Day, along with Rally Day, Children's Day, Temperance Day, Anti-Cigarette Day. She ultimately received the support of the most powerful politicians of the day, including Woodrow Wilson who made it a national holiday in 1914. I also discovered that innocent and sentimental as its origins were, from the beginning they contained a basic protest about the role assigned women by the culture. From the beginning there is a gentle but firm "protest" in the rhetoric of Mother's Day. Anna Jarvis, anyting but a feminist, nevertheless, as she promoted her idea, used to recite a playful, but ultimately very serious litany about the "patriarchy of the American Calendar." Said she:

> "Washington's birthday is for the 'Father of our Country'; Memorial Day for our 'Heroic Fathers'; Fourth of July for 'Patriot Fathers'; Labor Day for 'Laboring Fathers'; and even New Year's Day is for 'Old Father Time.'" [The Christian Century, "Piety, Commercialism, Activism: The Uses of Mother's Day," Leigh E. Schmidt, 5/8/91]

We have come a long way culturally since 1914 and Anna Jarvis' issue today is expressed in the struggle for the rights of women and mothers in education, the professions, and the marketplace. It is an issue that has to do with maternity leave and paternity leave, health care, - pre and post natal - day care, work place conditions and whether or not pregnancy is an added health and therefore legal risk. And beneath those questions there is an important issue being debated within the women's movement itself by feminist thinkers. Should our goal be to establish a society which treats men and women absolutely equally, without regard to gender, or do we want a society which acknowledges and accommodates to the uniqueness of women and men? Serious feminists line up on both sides of the question. Professor Bonnie Miller-McLemore at Chicago Theological Seminary wrote recently:

> "Between the warring ideological fronts stand the women in the trenches who must combine work and love amid a vacuum of models. The battle reached a climax for me when my role as mother in a public world not structured for and even hostile to children, collided head on with my feminist hopes for equality."
> [The Christian Century, "Returning to the Mother's House: A Feminist Look at Orpah," Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, 5/17/91]

That issue can be and often is painful. I sometimes think that the people involved, young people struggling with the demands of parenting and career in the competitive marketplace, are the new pioneers, pushing into an unexplored land and that they, who are brave enough to try and strong enough to bear the pain, are leading the rest of us into a new and important place.

Professor Miller-McLemore asks poignantly:

> "How can one be a mother and still retain one's effective intellectual and professional personality? How does the idea of equality fare next to the reality of the delight mothers can take in relationships with their children?"

Is there a Christian word for those difficult issues?

In some corners of the Christian community the word seems to be that we must return to traditional roles and to a neatly structured world in which male and female roles were clear and different. But we know better - we can't go back. We must find ways to honor and respect human beings regardless of gender, and at the same time stand with and help those in whose experience these issues become very sticky - women who are trying to combine having babies and career.

And the distinctive word Christian faith may have to offer is a way of discussing the issues: not simple solutions, but a methodology for dialogue.

In a new book reviewed by the New York Times last Sunday, Elizabeth Fox Genovese argues that the problem is the current attitude of individualism. It is not possible, she claims, for these difficult issues to be reconciled, or even resolved satisfactorily, so long as everybody is arguing only on the basis of the rights of the individual.

I couldn't help but remember a few years ago, in the middle of a rampant individualism named the New Narcissism, when we suddenly discovered that a century and a half before an astute observer recognized the glory but also the Achilles heel of American culture. Alex de Tocqueville noted our penchant for individualism, our "habit of the heart" he called it, the inclination to act solely in self-interest which ultimately could erode the experiment in republican democracy and undermine the conditions of freedom.

And it is precisely here that the faith has something to say - something about the primacy, not only of the rights of the individual, but love - something about the actual willingness of individuals to sacrifice themselves for a greater good.

We have been looking in recent weeks at a portion of the Gospel of John called the farewell discourses, the table conversation of Jesus at the Last Supper. And the issues of Mother's Day, the role of women, the difficulty of discussing these issues at all - all came into focus for me this week as I read the words:

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

That's a revolutionary statement. That's the moral foundation for a counter-culture, a way of thinking totally different from the individualism which starts and ends with me and mine, and which suggests that fullness of life, completeness, being a whole individual has more to do with giving, sacrificing, living for others, than getting, buying, accumulating.

"You live in my love as you obey my commandments - the first and primary one of which is to love one another," he said.

"There is no greater love than this - to lay down one's life for someone else."

Sometimes that happens. Sometimes people actually do it, actually endanger their own safety on behalf of someone else and whenever it happens it takes our breath away. Do you remember Cory Elliot, the twenty-nine-year-old Gary, Indiana bricklayer who broke down the door and ran into a burning house to rescue a father and three children, all of whom were unconscious; pulled one of them out, got badly burned, and walked back in a second time to get the others. Cory Elliot survived, barely, and he will never be the same.

"Why did he do such a thing?" the reporter asked. "What would drive a human being to such lengths?"

The reporter reviewed the classic historic and psychological studies of unusual heroism, what Emile Durkheim called "altruistic suicide." One psychiatrist said something intriguing: "When children are involved there is often a different sense of responsibility and care-taking." Ultimately, however, he said, psychiatry remains baffled by such examples of one person laying down life for another.

The reporter concludes, "There is another explanation, older and more profound than those offered by psychology, biology or sociology, an insight common to all great religions: we are all one."

I would call that the image of God in us, the capacity to love without regard for safety or security, the unexplainable beauty that within every human being there is the capacity to love and lay down one's life. God made us that way. God gave us the capacity to discover our own most powerful self-hood - in loving others - in living for others. God, I believe, created us with the capacity to be parents of creation, whether or not we are biological mothers or fathers, to love and live for generations yet to come, the children we see in front of us and their children and their children after them.

Jesus wanted them to remember that more than anything else after he was gone, wanted them to remember that they had that capacity within them,

that they were loved like that by their Creator, their God who cared for them like a mother cares for a nursing child and like a father welcomes the prodigal home. He put it simply and powerfully and intensely personally: "There is no greater love than to lay down life for friends." And he walked out of the room and did it, went out and died and wanted them to know that it was not for a noble principle, it was for them that he laid down life - and us. The Christian faith is about a God who loves like that, a God whose very being is self-giving, and who gives life away for others.

At the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, a Presbyterian Professor of Theology from Korea stunned the opening session by using native Korean customs, Aborginal dancers and liberation theology in a lecture. In an interview afterward she explained that her image of God was no longer an elderly Western male, but an old, bent, wrinkled Korean woman - her own mother in fact - who gave her life, lived for her, loved her and always accepted her. If you know about that - if you were and are the recipient of the selfless love of a mother or father - you are blessed indeed and this is a day of gratitude and celebration. But even if you are not, the word is that you are loved like that, by God.

It is at the heart of the universe, this love which creates us, nurtures us, lives for us and dies for us. And it is at the heart of Christ's blessed words to would-be disciples:

> "This is my commandent, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Amen.